

Sermon preached 15/11/2015 in St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney, by Rev Ross Smith.
The Sunday following Remembrance Day with the 30th Infantry Battalions attending.
Lectionary: 1 Samuel 1:3-20; Psalm 16; Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18), 19-25; Mark 13:1-8.

The End of Religion

Welcome to St Stephen's, all attending this special day of remembrance. A special welcome to those with links to the 30th Infantry Battalions. Battalion colours on our walls remind us of those links.

Remembrance is an important dynamic in human society. With this ritual, we mark our journey through life as individuals, families, groups, nations and world. Without remembrances we don't have a meaningful story to tell of where we have come from, where we are going, and who we are.

And so we construct rituals and ceremonies to celebrate origins, such as birthdays, wedding anniversaries, national founding days, and significant events. On such occasions, stories are told, often with the line: "Do you remember...?" As we get older, we do more remembering.

How far back can we go? In imagination, we say: "To the big bang that started the universe." Some say: "To origins of civilisation or the origin of a particular nation or group." We write histories of battalions or religions. All help toward telling us who we are, the kinds of journey we are making.

Why do we remember wars? Why do we go back to personal, national, and religious origins? It has to do, in part, with acknowledging the cost of the journey and a desire to learn from our mistakes, and the mistakes of others. We want a better way than we experienced in the past.

My father was a soldier in the Somme in what is called "The Great War." Many of us have had fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, friends and acquaintances involved in one or more of our many large and small modern wars, some of which have gone on longer than the "Great War". Pain, loss and suffering was felt by those at the forefront of the conflicts and for those waiting for their return.

Pain, loss and suffering are a significant part of life experience. Much of remembering and of religious practice is to find ways of dealing with these experiences. We try various methods to allow us to move on, to move forward in our lives so that we are not left numbed and immobile. We put a lot of effort into becoming reconciled with what has been, so that we can turn to face the future.

The Epistle to Hebrews is about the cost of our journey through life, and about the rite of sacrifice. The picture painted is of priests kept busy offering sacrifices which are meant to take away sins.

The word "sin" has a primary meaning of separation, and refers to a state of being rather than to a specific act or deed. The separation has three aspects: separation from one's own self, from others, and from God. People wanted their sin to be put behind them.

Because the state of separation is a permanent feature of human existence, the attempt to do away with it is continuous too. So the priests offering sacrifices to deal with separation have to work non-stop. The blood of sacrifices flowed continuously from the altar.

When we look back over recent human history we face the fact that huge amounts of sacrifice have been made in wars instigated by economic imperialism, nationalism and religion. Blood has flowed from many altars of sacrifice. Two such places in France, Pozieres and Villers-Bretonneux I saw in 2013. The Federal Government sponsored the Sydney Male Choir to sing on Anzac Day at the Dawn Service.

After the sacrifice of so many lives the questions are raised again and again, "When will we ever learn that wars don't resolve issues or competing claims." In the end, because the war has become too costly and futile to continue, people have to sit around a table and work out the terms for ending the conflict, and bringing peace. And the peace has to be seen as fair, otherwise it will lead to further conflict, sometimes sooner than later, as happened after the "Great War."

As is often said nowadays, there has to be a political decision, and political approaches need to be considered before arms are taken up.

In the time of Jesus, Rome ruled much of Europe and the Middle-East. Powerful and brutal armies made up of soldiers recruited from captured countries enforced rule and taxes. Rebel movements and nations outside the Roman umbrella were always attacking. One Jewish rebellion resulted in the Great Temple in Jerusalem being destroyed. This ended the sacrificial system of religion.

This is the context in which Christian approaches to world, to society, to individuals and groups were being worked through. Some elements of this are implied in what we read today in Hebrews. It speaks of one sacrifice for sin. Not many, but one.

“Christ offered himself as a sacrifice that is good forever. Now he is sitting at God's right side (the place of honour and power), and he will remain there until his enemies are put under his power. By his one sacrifice he has forever set free from sin the people he brings to God” (10:12-14). “When sins are forgiven, there is no need to offer sacrifices” (10:18).

What this approach, to the human predicament of separation from self, others and God, is telling us, is that nobody can bridge the gap of separation, despite all the efforts we may try to use to be re-united to self, others or God. This is what is meant by the phrase, “The End of Religion.” Human attempts to bridge the gaps through religious practice or ritual are futile.

The bridging of that gap is an act of grace from God, a gift which enables us to acknowledge that we exist as separated individuals and groups who yet have common interests, hopes, dreams and a longing for re-union or reconciliation.

We then have to take responsibility for the way we live, the choices we make, the separations we cause, or experience. Unhelpful, misguided or even destructive thoughts and actions will need to be acknowledged, and repented in individual, group and national levels.

Modern mass-communication means people everywhere are now familiar with what is going on in places near and far away. The whole human race is now responsible for the shape of the world.

We all have a say in what kind of political, economic and social forms can be devised, what is best for the sustainable development of a world where all can share fairly in the means of living, in having good health and environment.

Getting informed, viable solutions depends on willingness to share ideas and come to practical agreements. This is hard work and involves constant re-evaluation and checking of signals between groups and nations.

Implied in the way of Jesus, is a stance against making war, or taking by force, as a solution of the needs of a group, nation or individual. It is evident in the desire to see an increase of the love of God and neighbour. That desire is to be welcomed wherever we see it. As Christians, we understand it is a life-long endeavour.

This week has been a week of remembrance: remembrance of many sacrifices made in war. We also remember the sacrifice of Christ who offered himself to make atonement, of reconciliation, between God and man. The bridging of the gap.

Hebrews reminds us of our need for affirmation, and support. “We should keep on encouraging each other, especially since you know that the day of the Lord's coming is getting closer (10:25).

Remembrance Day encourages us to work for ending human sacrifice in war, to seek reconciliation, and to work for peace. When we “hear about wars and threats of wars,” Jesus says, “Don't be afraid.” Keep focussed and do what you can to increase the love of God and neighbour.